

Teen Literature: Demons Old and new

Margaret Mahy Lecture by Ken Catran

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The Electrical Engineer was in the office, reading his book. He was feeling very satisfied because things were going well. He looked up as someone entered. It was the Librarian from across the street. They were friends.

'Just thought I'd mention your book is due back today,' said the Librarian. 'Nearly finished,' replied the Engineer. 'Of course it is rather sad.'

'What is sad?' asked the Librarian.

The Engineer waved the book. 'This. It's such an obsolete means of information retrieval - and such a waste of resource.' He gestured across the street to the library. 'All the books in that entire building would fit into several small discs. I know librarians are sentimentally attached to their books but it's high time you thought up something better.'

'That's interesting,' replied the Librarian. 'We were discussing that, just this morning. But our needs would be rather special.'

'Go ahead,' said the Engineer. 'Nothing's too tough these days.'

'We'd need something made of biodegradable material, yet strong enough to last hundreds of years if it's stored properly.'

'One of the new plastics. No problem.'

'Hand-held or smaller.'

'No problematico.'

'No power source.'

The Engineer looked at him. 'No power source? You mean solar-powered cells...'

'No,' replied the Librarian. 'No power source at all. Lock it away in a dark cupboard for 50 years and it will still function perfectly.'

'You've been reading too much science-fiction!' replied the Engineer coldly. 'Everything needs a power source.'

'And lastly,' said the Librarian, unruffled. 'If one of the parts became loose, it could be fitted back into place or a copy made easily of local materials by anyone of reasonable intelligence.'

'Get out!' snapped the Engineer. 'Nothing like that exists on our planet. You people are dreamers.'

The Librarian gave a polite smile and left. The Engineer breathed hard for several moments, muttering to himself. 'Biodegradable, yet sustainable. Loose parts replaced by anyone of reasonable intelligence? No power source.'

Finally he laughed. Dreamers. That was exactly the right term for anyone who thought something could be made, in such defiance of the laws of electronics and communication.

And he went back to reading his book.

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So. I began my speech with the above anecdote to illustrate the enduring power of the book. Books are becoming increasingly sidelined by hi-tech and we often hear that, one day, you can carry the world's literature in your hip pocket. I suspect though, for some time to come, that you would need a very large pocket. We are also told books will become as extinct as the dinosaur. At the present time, I can trace no such evolution to a disc, without control of literature and the written word, passing into the hands of hi-tech gatekeepers – which means we could be dependent upon people we did not know, and machines we had no knowledge of. This, in fact, would be a hi-tech version of book burning.

I was very proud and flattered to be awarded the Margaret Mahy Medal, because I have long admired Margaret's unique writing and consider ourselves fortunate to have writers like her and Joy Cowley, who have such international stature. I was giving a talk at a primary school one day and there were questions at the end. A girl (about ten) put up her hand and said, 'but you're not like Margaret Mahy, are you?'

She certainly wasn't referring to a gender difference or a physical dissimilarity. She meant, I think, that Margaret, like all great authors, has something special that the rest of us can glimpse across a far field. A special ability to communicate, to get into the young mind, to pose stories that are both fascinating and multi-layered – and accomplished with an apparently effortless ease. Normally with most other authors, I could just say 'well, they write a different way' (implying with dismissive body language that mine is better) but I couldn't do this with Margaret because even I have standards.

Anyway, I took the line of least resistance and said 'no'. Ten-year-olds are extremely 'in their own way' and I think she sensed that this was an evasive answer. For the rest of the time, she looked at me with narrowed eyes and pursed lips as though she had sussed my reluctance to give an in-depth answer. When they left, she turned at the door and gave another long look. She knew she'd got me.

I do believe that writers evolve from their backgrounds. We are the sum total of what we were as children ourselves, and often this is what we communicate (even subconsciously) to our readers. For example, a teen reader asked why most of the characters in my books had no father – or one that was negligible. It rather startled me but since the question didn't involve Margaret Mahy, I was able to shut him up with a dissertation on character and family balance, etc.

In fact, my relationship with my father was strained and distant, and this is almost certainly the reason that they don't exist in general terms. Noteworthy too, that even when being aware of this, I still automatically (not consciously) excluded

fathers from my books. In fact, I think the only positive father-character who has any real presence, comes in a book I'm writing now – and he's divorced. I inherited a love of reading from my mother and (crowded out by three sisters) a desire for seclusion. I grew up in the totally different life-style of the '50s and early '60s when there was a ready job-market. If you truly did not want to work, then you could join the government in one of the many labour-intensive jobs available. I joined the government and drifted happily for several years. I was aimless because I didn't know what I wanted to do, apart from a vague desire to write.

In this time, however, I read. I would read fiction and non-fiction, on subjects as disparate as flying saucers, exploration of outer space and the ocean depths, dinosaurs, medieval history, and ancient civilisations. Troy and the Iliad were a favourite, so in the mail-sorting room of the Post Office, I was something of a curiosity. Everyone knew not to start a conversation about the Alamo or Custer's Last Stand. But essentially, what I was doing, was filling my mind with a database of information that would later stand me in good stead.

Realising that even I had to make a perfunctory effort at a career, I went into journalism and from there by successive stages, to freelance television writing, when TV1 and TV2 set up drama departments. It was my good fortune to enter television writing at that point in time (about 1975) because we were all learning. Also drama was eclectic and the guiding philosophy was to make our own drama and leave the formula shows for overseas, Britain and America, who could do it better.

Writing such shows as *Children of the Dog-Star*, adapting *Under the Mountain* and *Steel Riders*, was invaluable experience because they were solely written, unlike today where often there are teams of writers. I had to devise storyline, develop it into synopsis then scene breakdown, and then first and second drafts. So plot structure would come first, then dialogue, based on a thorough understanding of the characters. It was important to hold this in my mind and to plot strongly because each stage of script development would go through a committee of script editors, producer, head of drama – therefore everything had to be very strongly focused otherwise it would come apart in discussion. It also meant the writer became accustomed to what was often robust criticism. This in turn, enhanced my vocabulary and debating skills so that I could make my point without resorting to bloodshed.

About 1990, however, things were changing. TV was being run more and more by the 'Suits' and their agenda, born of Rogernomics, was profit-driven. Shows were targeted at the younger audiences with spending-power, and formula-based on overseas models. My wife Wendy and I took part in the creation of *Shortland Street*, based on a '70s Aussie soap called *The Young Doctors*, and even the mix of characters were the same.

About this time, I had begun writing books. *Deepwater Black* was written in 1992, the first of a trilogy, then other sci-fi and general fiction. It was – and is – difficult to survive on a writer's income but, with the support of Wendy, I was able to do this. I was also able to establish myself with an Australian publisher, Lothian

Books, which – at the time of writing – has been sold to a multi-national company, Hachette Livre. I have little to say about them except that with a 't' in Hachette, they would be well-named. Lothian now exists in name only.

I did not enter book writing lightly and am glad I resisted the impulse to think a successful television writer could easily write books. Most cannot, because although television teaches a lot about structure and pace and plot development, even the nuances of dialogue, it is a different medium. There is an arrogance in television, typified by the British producer of several prime-time shows, debating on telly about the respective merits of the two mediums. He said, 'what can a neuro-surgeon say to a foot-doctor?' To which the author replied, (God bless him), 'They could meet halfway up the body and discuss television'. Anyway, it was different and a learning curve. In fact, you do not stop learning and, having written some 47 books, I can see why a lot of authors do not read their early works.

As I write more, however, I become aware of my own background influences. Not going to university means I can't hold a conversation about Proust or Tolstoy or Samuel Johnson. As a reader of trivia, I am more interested in the fact that Johnson fed his cat oysters. My first two influences were Rosemary Sutcliff and Henry Treece. Also Robert Welch and several others, but these first two have a place of their own. I think they are two of the best young adult authors of last century.

Both wrote history and yet were very different, and this alone was an education to me. Sutcliff had a magic and inspirational ability to bring the English countryside to life in her books and use it almost as an emotional background to her characters and story. Her stories were well researched, involved and (even reading them today) very multi-layered. Her own biography *Blue Remembered Hills* contains keys to this. Even her scenes of violence were vivid but controlled and her characters come out of the pages. My favourite is still *Warrior Scarlet* given to me to read by a child psychologist, Quentin Brew, bless him forever. Sutcliff was, of course, very well served by her illustrator, Charles Keeping, and the balance and beauty of this, forming as it does an integral part of the story, is an art-form sadly lost. Publishers believe that senior teens don't want pictures. I believe that in today's visual world they do, so attempted this in my Jacko Moran series. I also ended up paying the illustrators' fee.

Henry Treece was very different. In some of his books, he bridges the fantasy and the real, and shows an uncanny ability to get into the meaning of kingship in Neolithic times. Some he wrote for the top ten percent of the reading public; others like *Horned Helmet* and *The Last Viking* are masterpieces of their kind. His books depended far less on background and more on a simple, even at times brutal, means of storytelling. He had a habit (one I disliked when young) of often killing off 'good guy' characters and to my own youthful mind, that seemed wrong. Good guys were meant to live. But he was showing that life is capricious and not always fair. Some of his books have dark and even negative endings, but the message gets across. Like Sutcliff, he used illustrations to stark effect.

I hope I remain in publication as long as they did.

I realised when I began writing history (as opposed to boring my fellow mail-clerks with it) that I had to find my own style. Mine was a first-person telling and based on the reality of the story behind the legend. A great many legends are simply dressed-up facts, or a reality romanticised into a good story. Telling these stories and the Jacko Moran series as a first-person story, was a means of involving the reader directly and the nicest compliment I can get now is, 'your stories make me feel I am there'.

I feel this is more important than ever now. Politicians (particularly at book awards) pay earnest compliments to the value of reading but in fact, do precious little about it. While they are prepared to spend millions producing a set of futile and gory ads about the perils of dangerous/drink driving, they do almost nothing about giving children that life-resource of knowledge and vocabulary, or even telling their parents how to induce this. If reading is on the decline (and enough hi-tech prophets of doom are saying this) it is simply because we underestimate and undervalue the power of the book and the simple means by which this can be passed on to the next generation, many of whom are growing up semi-literate in a hi-tech world.

Lastly, we have another problem – the gatekeepers. People sometimes ask why I want to write about warfare. Yes, it is bloody and awful but I don't do it for the shock-value. We are still engaged in warfare all over this planet and the object of my books is to show the reality of war and how it will leave a participant emotionally scarred. We have in New Zealand and that other large island across the Tasman – Australia – a bastion of eclectic teen reading, covering many subjects that concern teens. We have in New Zealand authors like David Hill, Bernard Beckett, Tessa Duder, Fleur Beale, Janice Marriot etc whose work is highly readable but also full of challenge.

This is where the gatekeepers come in. Challenge and subject should be controlled. 'Politically-correct' authors are belabouring young readers with the negative and distasteful mores of society, when all they actually want is sweetness and light. This is puzzling and indicates that these people seldom visit school libraries. Most young people have very good 'crap detectors' – evolved from years of deflecting telly ads – and they know when they are being preached at. Librarians have computers that tell them how often a book goes out and they simply don't buy books that teens are reading. As for forcing them to read certain books – try asking a Head of English if that is possible. The least you will get back is a hollow laugh.

They think it is wrong to mention the ocean to someone who has never seen it – this discriminates against them. Ethnicity, social problems, drugs, guns, knives, all the assortment of teen problems, all are taboo subjects. It does not matter how they are handled, or what stark message is sent, they should not be printed.

This is particularly common now in the States where recently *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* fell under the axe because of the word 'nigger'. Agreed, this is an offensive word but needs to be put in its place as a term used in the 1840s. A

short prologue would do this. Authors as diverse as Ray Bradbury, Shakespeare, William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, John Steinbeck, George Eliot, George Orwell, Plutarch, Edgar Allen Poe and Herman Melville, have been edited and cut about so much that the meaning is lost.

This is not doing our teens any favours. They will read these books anyway, later in life, and by denying them, their education at a critical time of life is limited. Intermediate and teen readings are a plateau that the young person will cross just once. It is the true freedom of choice and to the parents who proudly say, 'little Johnny is already reading *Lord of the Rings*' (one parent boasted his kid was reading Tom Clancy) I have to say, they are often only reading (and not understanding too well) for parental affirmation. Let them cross that plateau because that is when they establish their reading tastes and genres. Worry about Tom Clancy later and read him then until their brains trickle out their ears – and they probably will.

So therefore, with the spirited and inspired examples of the Mahys, the Cowleys and the Gees of our literature before me, I will go on writing what I hope teens want. Stories that do not detract from their intelligence, that confront them with the diverse and often challenging factors of life (as Treece did with me) and hope, as I did, that they can get enough out of them to pass on to another generation. It doesn't even matter how many. If just one young person is reading *Golden Prince*, *Odysseus* or *Jacko Moran* two or three generations on, that means I have passed on the legacy and the ongoing challenge of those wonderful authors who inspired and challenged me.